

*The Nicaraguan military buildup*

## Photo Intelligence and Public Persuasion

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In late 1981, President Reagan and his senior policymakers assigned a high-level national priority to Nicaragua because they feared the spread of the Sandinista revolution throughout Central America and because they were disturbed by the growth of Soviet and Cuban security ties to Nicaragua. The common denominator underlying these concerns was the Soviet-sponsored military buildup of the Sandinistas. In trying to form a nationwide consensus on US policy toward the Sandinistas, the President, during his first six years in office, conducted a public relations offensive that included the release of the contents of defector reports and press conferences given by Salvadoran and Nicaraguan defectors. Most often, however, the administration used photo intelligence to portray the situation in Nicaragua. From March 1982 through May 1988, the Reagan administration released a series of aerial reconnaissance photographs depicting military developments in Nicaragua.

### Using Declassified Photos

The first and perhaps most dramatic use of declassified material took place at the State Department on 9 March 1982, when CIA Deputy Director Bobby Inman and DIA Deputy Director John Hughes presented a photographic briefing on the Sandinista military buildup.<sup>1</sup> A year later, on 23 March 1983, the President took his case to

<sup>1</sup> Adm. Bobby Inman and John Hughes, "Evidence of Military Buildup in Nicaragua," statement at the State Department, Washington, D.C., 9 March 1982; "U.S. Offers Photos of Bases to Prove Nicaragua Threat," *The New York Times*, 10 March 1982, p. A18; "Taking Aim at Nicaragua," *Newsweek*, 22 March 1982, pp. 22-29.

the public using declassified reconnaissance photographs. Before a national television audience, he talked about the Soviet Union's military threat and its efforts to project power in the Caribbean. To illustrate the growing Soviet influence in the region, the President showed four declassified intelligence photographs, one of which was of Managua's Sandino Airfield.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the remainder of the administration's term of office, the release of additional classified photos was presented through a series of unclassified State and Defense Department publications. These background papers were produced at least once a year from 1983 through 1987.<sup>3</sup> Together, they covered various aspects of the political and military developments in Central America and the Caribbean. They included over 60 declassified aerial reconnaissance photographs of military-related areas in Nicaragua and neighboring El Salvador. In May 1988, four additional reconnaissance photographs of recent military developments in Nicaragua were declassified and made available to *The New York Times*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> "President's Speech on Military Spending and a New Defense," *The New York Times*, 24 March 1983, p. A20.

<sup>3</sup> These publications included: *Background Paper: Central America* (May 1983); *Background Paper: Nicaragua's Military Buildup and Support for Central American Subversion* (July 1984); *The Soviet-Cuba Connection in Central America and the Caribbean* (March 1985); *The Sandinista Military Buildup* (May 1985); *The Challenge to Democracy in Central America* (June 1986); and *The Sandinista Military Buildup: An Update* (October 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Pear, "Sandinistas Said to Prepare an Attack," *The New York Times*, 25 May 1988, p. A3.

## Assessing the Results

If success in using declassified photographic intelligence as a tool of public persuasion is measured by the subsequent achievement of a consensus on a policy initiative, then the Reagan administration's efforts regarding its policy on Nicaragua would be seen as a failure. In most cases, however, the equation is not that simple. In policymaking circles, where intelligence is routinely received and digested, intelligence information rarely is the sole determining factor in shaping a policy line. This also holds true among members of Congress and the American people. But intelligence information does have a bearing on the formation of the policy ideas and opinions held by those outside the policymaking circles. In some instances, declassified information will have a major impact in consensus building. In most cases, it will at least raise the public's awareness on the substance of the policy and create a foundation for an enlightened debate. Furthermore, within the context of a serious national debate, hard data, such as photographic intelligence, can add credibility to an argument as doubts and questions emerge during the course of the debate.

The conclusiveness and persuasiveness of the data contained in the collection of reconnaissance photographs released by the Reagan administration varied according to the intelligence topics. The photographs directly related to the military buildup in Nicaragua provided solid evidence. While the interpretation of overhead photography can be a somewhat esoteric discipline, the selection of the photographs released and the manner in which they were presented made them understandable to the untrained eye. Annotations were added to point out significant items, and ground-level prints of military equipment were frequently used to provide a better visual perspective of the same equipment seen in the overhead view. The photographs not directly related to the military buildup—Salvadoran rebel training and logistic bases, and Nicaraguan prisons—were less persuasive. In these cases, the interpretation and complete understanding of the significant points contained in the graphics required

additional information from other sources. This data was either not provided or was subject to question because of the undetermined reliability of the sources. When the photography was directed at hard military targets in Nicaragua, it did prove to be fairly persuasive.

## Seeking Smoking Guns

To justify its concerns about the situation in Nicaragua, the administration had to prove that the nature of the military buildup there threatened the hemispheric interests of the US and its Central American allies. This could be done by clearly illustrating that the buildup was exceeding any legitimate defensive needs and that, as part of the newly established Soviet-Nicaraguan military relationship, the USSR had begun to use or, at least had plans to use, Nicaragua as a base of military operations in the hemisphere. In this context, the relevance of the photographic intelligence to the administration's fundamental policy concerns varied. The images of such areas as radar sites and air defense sites could hardly be viewed as threatening to Nicaragua's neighbors. On the other hand, the construction of new army garrisons and military depots, the improvement of airfields, and the acquisition of new military equipment could be seen as tipping the regional balance of power in Nicaragua's favor. The one element of the buildup that would have clearly demonstrated the threatening nature of the Sandinistas' program would have been an air force equipped with jet fighter-bombers. Despite the many references to the Sandinista acquisition of Soviet MiG fighters, the administration could only show improved airfields capable of handling fighter-bomber aircraft.

The administration faced a similar situation in addressing the Soviet threat. The photographic evidence clearly revealed that the airfield under construction at Punte Huete near Managua was going to be a military airbase. Although the facilities at Punte Huete did indicate that it could handle any aircraft in the Soviet arsenal, the administration could not graphically support its warnings regarding potential Soviet air operations out of Nicaragua.

There was no smoking gun in the photographic evidence released by the Reagan administration. The various graphics accurately created a visual story of what was actually happening in Nicaragua, a slow, methodical military buildup supported and influenced by Cuba and the Soviet Union. In that respect, the photo intelligence was relevant and supported the administration's basic assertions and its fundamental concerns regarding a widespread military buildup in Nicaragua. This evidence, however, could not back up some of the worst-case scenarios that had frequently been part of the Reagan administration's foreign policy rhetoric.

## Protecting Security

The declassified photographs contained a wealth of information on military activity in Nicaragua. In releasing this intelligence, however, the administration neither revealed specific sources and methods nor compromised collection operations. Many public accounts asserted that the sources of the reconnaissance photographs were the U-2 and the SR-71 "spy planes."<sup>5</sup> The administration, however, never specifically identified the platform from which the photographs were taken. On at least one occasion, administration officials had debated the release of satellite photographs of developments in Nicaragua.

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## A Measured Reaction

The Sandinista government had been aware of reconnaissance flights over its territory, and it filed protests against US violations of Nicaraguan airspace. According to the data released by the Reagan

<sup>5</sup> For example, see "High-Tech Spyraft," *Newsweek*, 22 March 1982, p. 29; and "Peeking in on Managua," *Newsweek*, 19 November 1984, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Taubman, "Intelligence Aides Debated Reagan's Show of Satellite Photos," *The New York Times*, 24 March 1983, p. A22.

administration, however, the Sandinistas took no action to prevent such overflights by acquiring and deploying high-altitude surface-to-air missiles. Furthermore, the Nicaraguan military, at least as far as the declassified reconnaissance revealed, instituted no camouflage or concealment and deception measures to cover its actions. Years after the first photographs were declassified, the administration was still able to release new evidence that confirmed the ongoing construction of military facilities and the acquisition of new military equipment. The extent to which the US, through its aerial collection efforts against Nicaragua, was able to obtain a picture of the military buildup had apparently not been affected by the intelligence disclosures.

## An Important Contribution

The release of aerial reconnaissance photographs on developments in Nicaragua did have an impact on the overall foreign policy debate. Identifying that impact is essential in understanding what can realistically be expected when intelligence is used as a tool in public persuasion. In the case of US policy on Nicaragua, the debate revolved around the way in which the US should address the changes taking place in Central America. The reconnaissance photography could confirm the military buildup and, to a lesser degree, could reveal the threat. It could not, however, persuade those who advocated a diplomatic approach to approve the use of force either directly by the US or indirectly by the Contras. The crux of the administration's difficulty was its inability to form a consensus that military pressure was the only effective option in confronting the Sandinista revolution. This was part of the policy debate where declassified intelligence had limited persuasiveness.

The photography supported many of the administration's charges and, when combined with data obtained from other sources, provided a detailed picture of ongoing events in Nicaragua. The release of this intelligence fostered an environment where the national debate was not limited to emotional pleas or ideological pronouncements but was broadened to include a discussion of the evidence. In that regard, the role of photo intelligence in the policy process was significant.

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